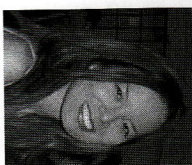


ABSTRACT

Hidden visual curriculum of an art school: a case study.



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Reflection on the Role

of Artists: A Case Study on the Hidden Visual Curriculum of the School of the Art Institute of Chicago

In 2005, Maria Acaso, professor in Art Education at the Universidad Complutense Madrid in Spain, conducted a comparative research project on visual configurations at different art schools in Europe and the United States. She was interested in exploring the relationship of visual culture and hidden curriculum on campus, and the effect of these on students' perception of their role as emerging artists in the society. The study of hidden visual curriculum examines how knowledge and cultural/political/social values can be transmitted to students through the content of images or spatial arrangement of school facilities. For her study, Acaso chose the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC) specifically for its contrasts with the school where she teaches in Madrid. The Universidad Complutense is relatively conservative and does not have the SAIC's reputation for teaching innovative contemporary art.

In September 2005, Professor Acaso arrived in Chicago to begin her two-month research project at SAIC. At the time, the authors (Marissa Baker and Carol Ng-He) were graduate students at the in the Department of Art Education at SAIC. We responded to the department's announcement about this research opportunity with a visiting professor and subsequently joined Professor Acaso on the research project.

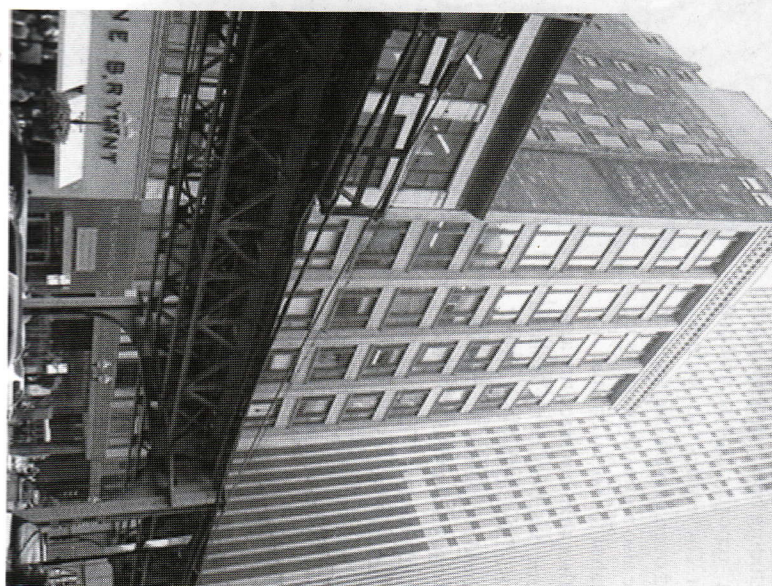
For Jackson, hidden curriculum involves the framing and transmission of a complex of institutional values, beliefs, and norms to students.

involves more than the simple transmission of knowledge to students. For Jackson, hidden curriculum involves the framing and transmission of a complex of institutional values, beliefs, and norms to students. Scholars such as Emil Durkheim, Pierre Bordieu, Michael Apple, Henry Giroux, Peter McLaren, Bell Hooks, and Paulo Freire have critically examined education systems and the relationship of hidden curriculum and political advocacy for social justice. Eric Margolis defines the hidden curriculum as "the element of socialization that takes place in school but [is] not part of the formal curricular content" (18-19). A new category of study has emerged—"visual cultural studies," as coined by Nicholas Mirzoeff in 2002. Visual cultural studies focus on a variety of aspects of culture through re-examination and reinterpretation of visual images. This field of inquiry has become increasingly popular in the field of art education and aims to create a more

engaging curriculum that allows students to be self-reflective critical thinkers. Some examples of publications relating to visual culture in art education include Kerry Freedman's *Teaching Visual Culture: Curriculum, Aesthetics, and the Social Life of Art*, Kevin Tavin's *Wrestling with Angels, Searching for Ghosts: Towards a Critical Pedagogy of Visual Culture*, and Margaret Dikovitskaya's *The Study of the Visual after the Cultural Turn*.

In our research, we have found commonality between the two discourses—hidden curriculum and visual culture—since both examine how knowledge and cultural/political/social values can be transmitted through visual

This research project furthered prior research by other scholars, educators, and artists on the connection between hidden curriculum, visual culture, and students' learning in schools. Sociologist Phillip Jackson coined the term "hidden curriculum," in connections with his emphasis on the psychological dimensions of schooling and the idea that education



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Sharp building (located at 37 South Wabash Avenue, Chicago).

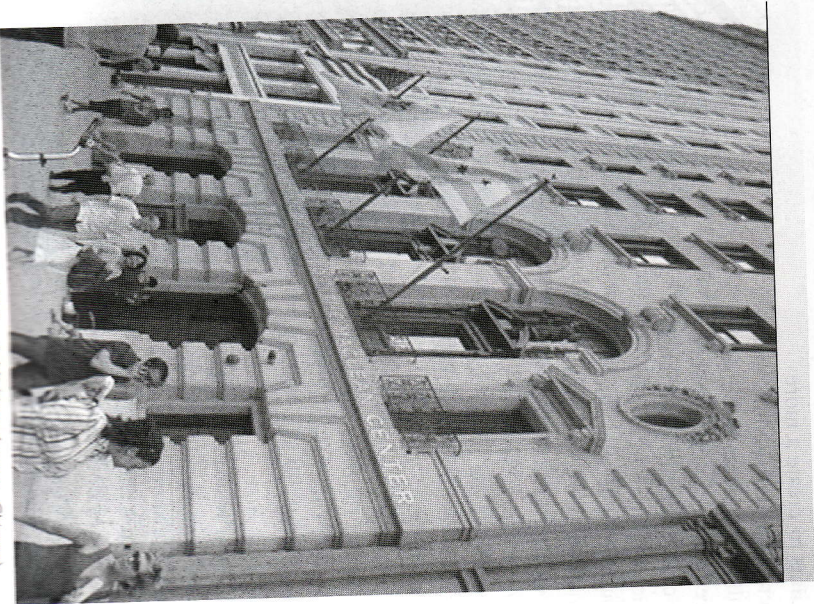
configurations, whether in the content of images or in the visual configuration of school facilities. In this regard, we find that visual culture constitutes the basis of a specific type of hidden curriculum: the *hidden visual curriculum*—which applies the discourse of “visual culture” to the analysis of visual curriculum and allows one to expose a “hidden” visual curriculum. Unlike the official curricula in which educational objectives are stated explicitly, visual curriculum is hidden, embedded in the visual experience of the students. In other words, hidden visual curriculum is a discourse of transmission and appropriation of institutional norms, values, and beliefs deriving from the visual images displayed in schools and assimilated by students through unconscious learning outside of the formal curricula.

As art educators, the authors of this article believe in liberation education, which helps both students and teachers to practice democracy and social justice and reveal bias and engages students in the search for causes and solutions to oppression. Our research was motivated by the desire to empower students and teachers. We attempted an approach to research that seeks to effect empowerment at all stages of the process through critical analysis of power and responsible use of power” (Ristock and Pennell 9). Our method was to apply a “critical analysis of power” to that part of SAIC’s hidden visual curriculum that attempts to transmit information to students about “the role of the artist.”

Community artist and

educator Suzanne Lacy defines the roles of modern artists as including being an “experimenter,” reporter, analyst, and activist. These roles can coexist and overlap with one another. She also argues that artists are a catalyst for social change. Rather than embrace the aesthetic practices of the isolated artist, Lacy argues that artists should reposition themselves as “citizen-activists” to effect social change (177). For Lacy, artists have a responsibility to act from an understanding of social systems and institutions. She states,

Entirely new strategies must be learned: how to collaborate, how to develop multilayered and specific audiences, how to cross over with other disciplines, how to choose sites that resonate



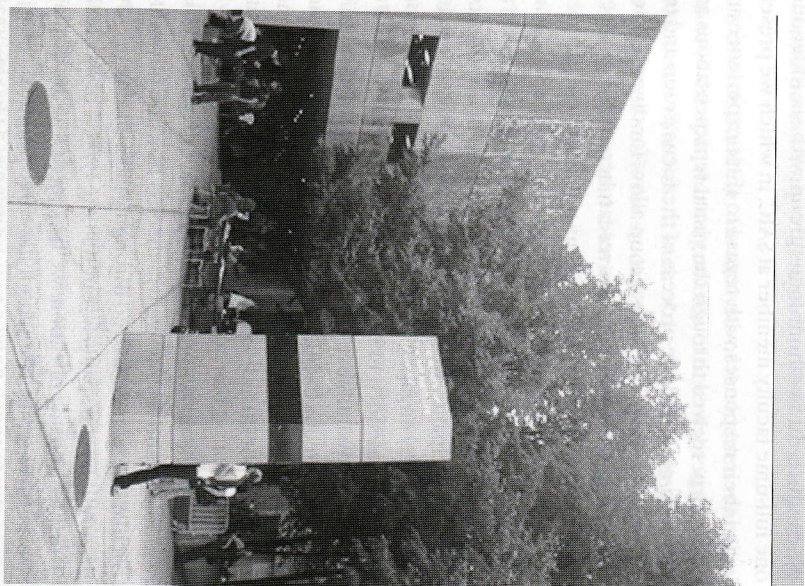
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Plachan building (located at 112 South Michigan Avenue, Chicago)

with public meaning, and how to clarify visual and process symbolism for people who are not educated in art. In other words, artist-activists question the primacy of separation as an artistic stance and undertake the consensual production of meaning with the public. (177)

While political and social engagement in the arts has been discussed and debated for more than a century, Lacy’s view of the artist poses the need for art practices that are communal, collaborative, and interdisciplinary. Lacy’s redefinition of the role of the artist renews a strong mission and direction of arts practices, and this practice is being embraced by an increasing number of artists nationally and internationally. With these artists’ roles in mind, it is critical for us to reflect how our own school (SAIC) adapts to this trend and how the school prepares the students, or the emerging artists, to recognize and inhabit these roles, through not only its formal curriculum but also its informal discourse—the hidden visual curriculum.

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Columbus building (located at 280 South Columbus Drive, Chicago).

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Schools are sites of social change and reification. Therefore, our research sought to answer a question: *How does the hidden visual curriculum of SAIC reveal the school’s concept of the role of the artist in society?*

Our method of investigation was as follows:

- We first collected the floor plans of each building of the school; we then proceeded to photograph each floor. We collected more than 1,000 photographs of the visual configurations, including spatial arrangements and allocations of decorative objects and furniture on SAIC’s campus.
- We classified these photographs according to the spatial allocations and organizations of visual representations.

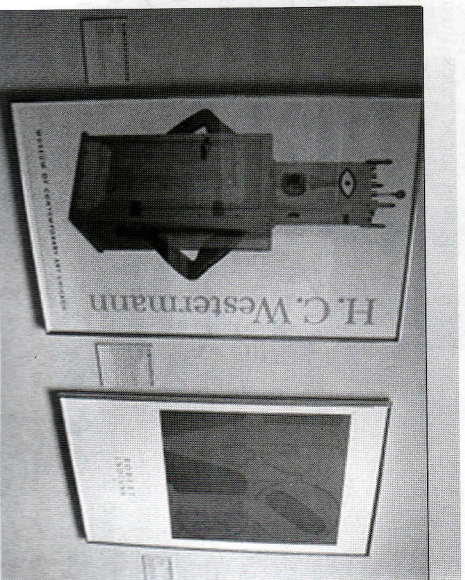
- We conducted a two-hour focus group with six individuals, including five students and one full-time faculty member at SAIC, in which we presented our photographs and collected their responses with regard to their experience and ideas about the roles of artists that they perceived through the visual representations at the school.
- We video-recorded the process of the focus group and transcribed the responses. Our intent was to have the focus group allow for diverse voices in this research. In addition, since there were three of us as researchers in this project, we aimed to interpret the data from multiple perspectives.

We recognized that the short, two-month time frame of this project might place some limitations on the research outcomes. In spite of our efforts to ensure a diverse group of research participants, we understood that our shared preference for collaborative arts and vision of socially engaged practices would embed bias in our data interpretations. Our research was intended to be a qualitative, interpretive, and creative critique instead of a scientific and quantitative analysis. Another factor that limited our research was the potentially homogeneous background of our focus group: the members were all from the Department of Art Education in the school. Finally, because of time limitations, the scope of our research did not include other forms of curriculum, such as formal, oral, and written curriculum.

In this article we will discuss a small part of our analysis as to provide a basic sense of methodology and results. We will discuss how the physical surroundings transmit a hidden curricular content. We will go through each building of SAIC's campus and look at some visual configurations and spatial layout that are typical of our research findings.

During our data collection, we first looked at the displays and representations of the artworks on campus. The school has three buildings: Sharp, Maclean, and Columbus. The Sharp building is primarily administrative and is perhaps the most highly trafficked location on campus. In the lobby there is a site where SAIC proudly celebrated the achievements of selected artists. This features a series of prints of paintings and drawings by several internationally renowned

visual artists who were alumni of SAIC, including Georgia O'Keefe. Examination of the executive floor in the same building, where the offices of the deans and President are located, revealed the display of similar works, prints, or reproductions of the artworks that were created by few individual famous artists, who were also SAIC alumni (see Images 1 and 2). This raised a question as we proceeded with our research: *What does this selection and specific placement of the artworks suggest about*



Marissa H. Boker

Reproduced posters by some SAIC famous alumni framed and displayed on the executive floor of the Sharp building

the school's underlying preferences and perceptions with regard to the role and practice of artists in today's society?

As we went up to different floors of each building, our analysis of the hidden visual curriculum shifted to an investigation of the spatial arrangements of one of the important facilities on campus for individual students—studios. In each of the three buildings of the school, there was at least one floor dedicated solely for studios for students who were enrolled in fine arts programs, including painting and drawing, sculpture, ceramics, and print-making. Each studio was divided by walls and the entrance was covered by a curtain (Image 3). This spatial arrangement allowed fine arts students to have the unlimited access to the studios for their school or extracurricular projects. This physical separation of students' workspace seemingly encouraged individuality of art making and practicing rather than learning through work in partnership or collaboration.

In the Sharp, Maclean, and Columbus buildings, there is a different emphasis of functions based on their facility arrangement. This physical separation of theory-oriented and practice-oriented programs, for us, seemed to reflect an undervaluing of the collaborative objective and a division of artistic practices. As we examined the use of space more closely we noticed that the layout of each building, as well as each floor within each building, signified different academic functions. The Sharp building houses executive and administrative functions, as well as departments that are mainly theory based: arts administration and policy, art education, art therapy, fashion design, liberal arts, first-year program for undergraduate students, and Writing. The Maclean building houses "applied" art departments: Architecture, Interior Architecture and Designed Objects, Art History, Theory and Criticism, Visual Communication, Film and Video, and Visual and Critical studies. The Columbus building is where "fine" art departments are located: Ceramics, Painting and Drawing, Performance, Photography, Printmaking, and Sculpture. In our analysis of the spatial allocation of the academic departments, we acknowledged practical considerations of sharing resources among departments within the same buildings. However, we observed that such considerations also have produced a division and categorization of artistic practices as well as a potential lack of collaboration between departments. This raised another two questions for us to ponder as researchers: Why this arrangement? What does this geographic division according to art practices say to students about their artistic responsibility in their communities?

An emerging conclusion from our research on the division of academic spatial arrangement was that certain art-making methods are more valued than others. The hidden visual curriculum tells us that SAIC inclines to produce artists who work alone, rather than collaboratively or as socially engaged practitioners; it emphasizes a singular, segregated practice, rather than an interdisciplinary one. We believe that the hidden visual curriculum plays a critical and powerful role in reinforcing the social positioning of artists, a process that involves much more than just courses on technical artistry.

The privileging of individual practice suggested by our findings is in contrast with the current cultural trajectory of art practices, as noted by other scholars. Artist, art critic, and educator Suzi Gablik also questions what it means to be a "successful" artist working in the world today in her essay "Connective Aesthetic: Art After Individualism." Gablik argues for a "revisiting" of artist's role in our society:

Our culture's romance with individualism is no longer adequate. My own work and thinking have led me to a field like conception of the self that includes more of the environment—a selfhood

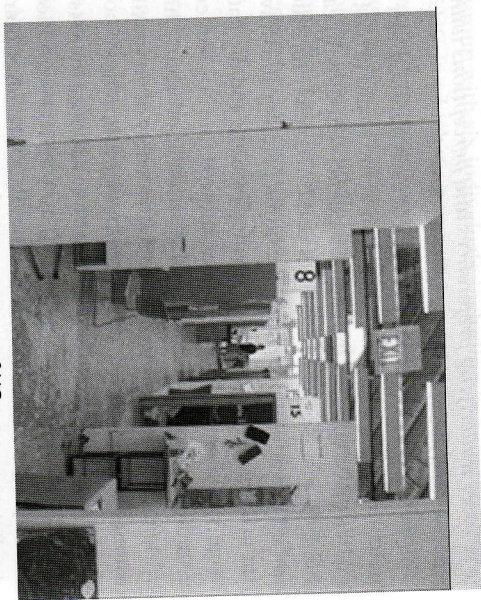
that releases us into a sense of our radical relatedness. . . .

Connective aesthetics sees that human nature is deeply embedded in the world. It makes art into a model for *connectedness* [italics added] and healing by opening up being to its full dimensionality—not just the disembodied eye. (85–86)

Gablik views "connective aesthetics" as a move away from individual endeavor and toward an art making that is integrated as a socially responsive form.

She describes the connective aesthetics as art that focuses interdependence and interconnectedness, and grounds itself in the community. Both Gablik and Lacy posit a socially engaged practice, in which artists are no longer autonomous and isolated.

Schools should be places for experiments, growth, and, most importantly, social change. In light of the need to move toward a community-integrated art practice, we hope that our analysis of SAIC as our initial case study will stimulate further self-examination of the hidden and visual curriculum by faculty and students and lead toward an in-depth search for meaning and value in art-making disciplines. We hope such a search will generate constructive change that advances the goal of liberation education for democracy. We believe an enhanced consciousness of hidden visual curriculum can play a role in effecting this change. Eventually, schools will truly become a critical and transformative fertile ground for "citizen-artists" who can make an impact on society.



Private student studios on SAIC campus.

Marissa H. Baker

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